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ABSTRACT

In ethnographic research, silence can be probed as a filter through which to understand metaphors present and absent in conversations. The question posited in this study is how to account for silence as deliberate. From analysis of conversational interactions with classroom teachers, it became apparent that the silences also had meaning, that they were "inhabited." Probing of the silences revealed that although the focus of the conversations was race, the teachers' awareness of themselves as raced (i.e., as having a racial identity) was absent from the conversations. When asked how they described themselves, the teachers included many non-racial descriptors; race was also absent from written biographies. Because whiteness continues to be construcd as the norm, it is rendered invisible. Additionally, when asked how they saw themselves racially, the responses focused not on their race but rather on their identity as white women. Reversing the polarities of silence and talk, or treating talk as the ground and silence as the figure for analysis, results in making the familiar strange and the strange familiar. It is suggested that researchers can become more open to the possibility of multiple meanings in silences and thus find new areas for research. (Contains 26 references.) (JLS)

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# Inhabited Silences in Feminist Poststructural Inquiry

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## Introduction

My remarks are framed in the context of a qualitative, postpositivist exploration of how White teachers engage the discourses of race and culture in their classrooms. Specifically, the study in which I have engaged deals with an examination by White teachers in an urban school district of their own identity as raced individuals, and how an unmasking of the absent presence of whiteness affects pedagogy and subsequent implications for teacher education. Because whiteness is something for Whites that often goes unnamed, unnoticed, and unspoken, the silence or absence (that which is not spoken) provides a framework for the analysis of the conversations that I had with a group of White teachers. After much searching for answers in the tapes of my conversations I began to realize that what I had been missing was not in what *had been* said, but in what *had not* been said.

I understand whiteness as a signifier which enables me as a White woman to enter a dialogue about race without always talking about a non-white other. It is not to assume that there is a homogenous "White" culture. To talk of whiteness is to move the discussion from one of racial oppression (i.e., the Other) to racial privilege (i.e., self). "For many white people in the United States . . . 'color blindness' -- a mode of thinking about race organized around an effort to not 'see,' or at any rate not to acknowledge, race differences -- continues to be the polite 'language of race'" (Frankenberg 1993, p. 142). Whiteness is

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often not seen by Whites because Whites occupy the territory of whiteness as a site of dominance. To speak then of whiteness is "to assign *everyone* a place in the relations of racism" (p. 6). In order for me to more completely understand conversations that I had with White teachers about race, it is imperative that I examine how race is seen -- or more often not seen and therefore not voiced -- by this group of White teachers.

Adrienne Rich (1996) writes that in her role as the editor of *Best American Poetry 1996*, she confirmed that those most often publishing poems in magazines today are usually White. And while this may come as no surprise, what is relevant for the current discussion is that when White poets write of race, "relationships of race and power exist in their poems most often as silence or muffled subtext" (1996, p. 32). I propose that researchers not dismiss silence as an omission or absence of data, but rather begin to engage the silences as meaningful and inhabited. In order to do so it will be necessary to search for strategies which make visible the muffled subtext -- the inhabitants of the silence. This is especially important for researchers who pursue issues of race and culture in education.

I turn to other disciplines which recognize silence as purposeful and meaningful -- communications and social interaction (See for example Saville-Troike 1985, Tannen 1985), psychotherapy (See for example Roth 1987, Strean 1990), and poetry (see for example Rich 1996, Rumi 1995) in an attempt to call attention to what has been absent in an analysis of the records of research -- namely silence. Specifically, I will explore in detail how a poetic understanding of silence may provide a fruitful discourse in which researchers can begin to examine silence as worthy of an audience.

## The Inhabited Space of Silence

If the records of research are artifacts which we name, record, and analyze in the doing of research, how can I begin to understand silence as inhabited and therefore legitimated in what counts as data? Lincoln & Guba (1985) label those sources of

naturalistic inquiry as "the observational and interview notes accumulated in the field, documents and records, unobtrusive traces, and the like" (p. 333). Bettie St.Pierre (In Press) in a probing of the unobtrusive traces of data sources maintains that "we have barely begun to name, describe, and account for such in our research" (p. 10). To her discussion of data that have transgressed those categories: emotional data, dream data, and sensual data, I wish to add and explicate that of *silent data*.

In the doing of research, I have found myself restricted by the notion of what counts as "data."[1] As I reviewed my transcripts for the current study, I began to notice that there were absences and silences in the conversations. LeCompte and Preissle (1993) write that "Qualitative researchers must balance between two problems: too much data and too little data. If the data are too thin, the researcher has insufficient evidence to substantiate results" (p. 54). My first "listening" was filled with frustration for what was not being discussed in the tapes and a dread that I didn't have enough information (i.e., "thin data") and would therefore have to postpone the analysis phase of my project. "Perhaps because silence in communicative settings is often taken simply for inaction, . . . the important position of silence . . . has been largely overlooked" (Saville-Troike 1985, p. 15). A closer "listening" however produced a haunting silence. I continued to be haunted by the absences in the conversations, perhaps things that I would liked to have heard, but no more important as a voiced presence than they were as a silent absence: confusion absent of emotion; recognition of actions motivated by racism absent of an awareness of one's own racist actions or beliefs; intellectual discussions of White privilege absent of a recognition of how they/we continue to deny, protect, and (re)inscribe the privilege; absence of an

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[1] I purposefully choose not to use the signifier "data" to talk about the information sources which inform my study. Data is a positivist term which implies a fixed set of facts or knowledge about a particular topic. I am bound by the use of the word as I quote from the methodological literature, however, I will present the sources for my research as narratives, texts, documents, records, writings, reflections, and silences. This is not an exhaustive list but one that is intended to assist the reader. I engage in this purposeful strategy as I continue to do research within a postpositivist paradigm and against a positivist paradigm.

expressed fear which I suspect would be present were we as Whites to begin to question our own identity as raced.

My questions then are how can I pay attention to the absences with the same degree of attentiveness with which I pay attention to that which is spoken? What might it mean to begin to listen to the silence? In discussing ethnography as a process, LeCompte and Preissle (1993) state that "ethnographic research is holistic. Ethnographers seek to construct descriptions of total phenomena within their various contexts" (p. 3). I desire to consider the silence as part of the "total phenomena" with which I as an educational ethnographer concern myself in pursuit of an holistic approach. To seek the trace always already present in the silence.

## A Poetics of Silence

> At a certain point you say to the woods, to the sea, to the mountains, the world, Now I am ready. Now I will stop and be wholly attentive. You empty yourself and wait, listening. After a time you hear it: there is nothing there. There is nothing but those things only, those created objects, discrete, growing or holding, or swaying, being rained on or raining, held, flooding or ebbing, standing, or spread. You feel the world's word as a tension, a hum, a single chorused note everywhere the same. This is it: this hum is the silence. . . (Dillard, 1991, p. 255).

References to silence in methodological literature often refer to the silencing of stories (see Lather 1996), but this is not the case in the literature of poetry and prose. Speaking at the 1996 Dodge Poetry Festival, Briget Pegeen Kelly (Spoken Poems and Silent Readings, September 19, 1996) speaks of silence as "inhabited." Inhabited signifying that there is meaning and breath in the silences. Gerald Stern (Spoken Poems and Silent Readings, September 19, 1996) further elaborates that there is an awareness of the presence of silence in the uttering of poetry. Robert Hass (Poets on Poetry, September 20, 1996) states that poets look for ways to tap into feelings and emotions in the silences, describing those silences as the breath and the life. Many poets speak of the life of poems as being in the breath, the pauses, the unwritten cadences.



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A poetic understanding of silence is not something to be avoided as when new teachers feel the need to provide an answer if students do not respond quickly, nor is it an awkward void which makes us uncomfortable as when traveling in an elevator with eyes fixed straight ahead, nor is it something to be feared as an angry parent that doesn't speak, but it is that which is always already there, breathing, speaking, and inhabited. In a poem entitled "Enough Words?" Rumi (1995), a thirteenth century mystic and poet speaks of the soul as living in the "silent breath" (p. 20-21).

I am interested in probing what is to be found in silence using poetry, not as a genre for presenting qualitative research as practiced by Laurel Richardson, (1993) but as a filter through which to understand metaphors present and absent in the conversations. Not a discussion of the silencing of voices, instead the silence present in the stories. I wish to posit the question of how to account for nothingness, absence, or silence as deliberate in the analysis of the records of research. I wish to create a process or strategies for hearing the silence.

Patti Lather (1996) writes of being invested as an author in "a practice that erases itself at the same time as it produces itself. Such a practice makes space for returns, silence, interruptions . . . Such a practice ignites in writing and reading [and listening] what is beyond the word and the rationally accessible" (pp. 531-532). I want to make a space for the silence to breathe and inform as I listen to the transcripts and read journal reflections.

Langston Hughes (1994) writes of the meaning present beyond the word in the spoken silence:

**Silence**

I catch the pattern
Of your silence
Before you speak.

I do not need
To hear a word.

In your silence
Every tone I seek
Is heard.

(p. 234).

I want to listen to the silence in an attempt to hear the voices contained within the silence.

## Theorizing Silence

> In Persian poetry the poet often refers to himself or herself by name at the end of a poem as a sort of signature. Rumi's variation on this is to refer instead to . . . silence [over a thousand poems end this way]. He gives the poetry to its true authorship, including the emptiness after as part of the poem.
> (Rumi 1995, p. 17)

Silences -- pauses -- sighs -- absences -- meanings without words; words which are not spoken. Theorizing silence is much like theorizing whiteness. The absences are present, yet elusive; demanding, yet invisible. As I try to conceptualize and theorize the absence and silence, I am reminded of Dyer (1988) writing of whiteness as often not feeling as if there is a subject at all. "The colourless multi-colourdness of whiteness secures white power by making it hard, especially for white people and their media to 'see' whiteness. This, of course, makes it very hard to analyze. . . The subject seems to fall apart in your hands before you begin" (Dyer, 1988, p. 46).

How then do I write about silence; present only in the absence? What if we were to consider a musical rest as a purposeful silence, an absence with meaning? What might it mean then to view (hear) silences as purposeful metaphors -- "metaphor[s] as a detour to truth" (Spivak, 1976, p. lxxiv) -- masking a truth which resides in the "borrowed dwelling of a metaphor" (p. lxxiv). What are the "truths" which are being masked in the metaphor of silence? What are the strategies that Morrison (1992) refers to for hearing the silences in order that we might be able to break those silences? What is the reading of silence as a metaphor as one that "produces rather than protects" (Spivak, 1974, p. lxxv)

Spivak (1976) writes that "Fiction begins in the truth of the author and ends in the uncovering of that truth by the critic" (p. lxxiv). What are the truths which are being lived out in the "fiction" of rhetoric (to which we usually attend)? Are these truths primary or secondary to what is being said in the absences? What is it that we may hope to uncover by listening to the absences? "The so-called secondary material [silence] is not a simple adjunct to the so-called primary text [what is spoken]. The latter inserts itself within the interstices of the former, filling holes that are always already there" (p. lxxiv). The silences are folded into the text, decentering and recentering (Wyschogrod 1990, p. 22).

What is "always already" there? What is the "hidden truth" which inserts itself into the text? Spivak (1976) informs us that the text is not a unique creation. It in fact "belongs to language, not to the sovereign and generating author" (p. lxxiv). To begin an examination of these questions, we must then look to the "truths" which are hidden in the "text" of the language in order to begin to understand the meaning behind -- under -- around -- surrounding the metaphors present in both the spoken (present) and the silent (absent).

To look for the "hidden truth" which inserts itself into the text means to move beyond a simplistic modernist orientation which subscribes to the adage, "seeing [hearing] is believing," to a reformulation of what is knowable (seeable and hearable) outside the boundaries traditionally prescribed. It means to shift from a simplistic positivist view of the



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world that looks at what is on the surface as "real," clear, knowable, and one-dimensional; in other words as that which is seeable and hearable as therefore knowable and understood. Theorizing the silences requires a plumbing of the depths of what is seeable (recordable) and what is not. It requires an attention to silence as an unobtrusive yet demanding transgressive data source.

Deborah Tannen and Muriel Saville-Troike (1985) provoke the question, what is silence? In pursuit of this question they write that

> Silence is most often an out-of-awareness phenomenon -- the ground against which the figure of talk is perceived. By reversing polarities and treating silence as the figure to be examined against the ground of talk (as well as other actions or events), we aim to heighten awareness of this universal aspect of human behavior while at the same time emphasizing its complex nature as a cultural phenomenon and its richness as a research site. (p. xi).

In this example silence is unobtrusive (i.e., often unrecognized) however, demanding in that it can possess many meanings. If we reverse the binary and give preference to silence, the result is an attentiveness to silence which may produce multiple orations previously unnoticed. Deconstruction in a nutshell according to Spivak (1976). "To locate the promising marginal text, to disclose the undecidable moment, to pry it loose with the positive lever of the signifier; to reverse the resident hierarchy [presence/absence, speech/silence], only to displace it; to dismantle in order to reconstitute what is always already inscribed" (p. lxxvii).

The writings of scholars in the fields of communication, social interaction, and psychotherapy have much to say about furthering our understanding of silence. Scollon (1985 p. 21) writes that "Studies of communication have tended to look at silence as absence -- as absence of sound and therefore as absence of communication" (p. 21). Saville-Troike (1985) concurs that silence has traditionally been defined negatively -- as the absence of speech. She is emphatic in her stance that "we can view silence as itself a valid object of investigation (p. 4). She continues, however, by emphasizing that a distinction is to be made "between an absence of sound when no communication is going on, and silence

which is part of communication" (p. 4). It is the silence which is part of communication which I wish to pursue. The silence which is "a matter of saying nothing and meaning something" (Tannen, 1985, p. 97).

Psychotherapist Herbert Strean echoes this idea of voices and multiple messages contained in the silences. Discussing Freud and the importance of analysts' silence he writes, "The silence, far from being an expression of passivity, should be considered an expression of what Reuben Fine (1982) has called 'dynamic inactivity'" (Strean 1990 p. 48). Not only is it dynamic, but it also may signal multiple meanings. "When clients do not talk to their therapists, the silence can have many possible meanings" (p. 202).

And so to theorize silence and to be purposeful in our pursuit of *purposeful silences* is to give preference to the silence, the absence, the white space. It is to allow the blank spaces to "decenter the text so that there is no total or proper text" (Wyschogrod 1990, p. 22). It is to seek the unintelligible truths masked by our whiteness which blanket and conceal, which are present in the silence of absence. It is to ask how conversations reveal the truths which are unintelligible even to those who speak them. It is to identify the "safe" topics we discuss which white wash discourses of race and culture. And it is to embrace a problematic of silence as we search for methods that will help us begin to recognize that which is absent and unknowable to ourselves. It is in the words of Milan Kundera (1984) to search for the "unintelligible truth."

## Toward a Problematic of Silence

In writing about conceptual structures termed problematics, Giroux (1988) explains that "problematics refer not only to what is included in a worldview, but also, to what is left out and silenced. That which is not said is as important as that which is said" (p. 4) The problematic of silence changes the questions knowable and askable. Silences may not be restricted to a lack or a void, they may also be listened to as strategic (purposeful) or as an indication of an absence of awareness.

In writing about my own silences in discussing racism with my research participants, I recounted the following:

> One of my own silences is talk of racism. This is both a purposeful silence and an absent silence. By purposeful silence, I mean that I purposefully chose not to talk about the existence or denial of racism with these teachers. I did not want our discussions to center on an existence or denial of racism, but instead wanted to focus on an assumption of an unacknowledged existence on the part of Whites as being raced.
>
> Were there other silences related to a discussion of racism to which I did not engage, not of a purposeful planned nature, but of a disattending absent nature? I believe that the answer is yes. An attentiveness to my own silences reveals an avoidance of a discussion of racism. Certainly I can justify this absence -- I did not want to scare off my participants, I did not want the conversations to bog down on a discussion of racism, it was not really the topic that I wanted to focus on -- as legitimate; however, continued self reflexivity presents understandings which are not so easily discarded and justified (Mazzei, 1996, p. 181).

Given such an orientation, researchers don't disregard what is not present, but ask questions of what is not present and why. I wish to illustrate how the strategy of hearing silence as purposeful or as a lack of awareness interrupted the sameness of analyzing the conversations I had with the teachers in my study.

A probing of the silence in my research began to reveal several things to me which did indeed demand my attention. Upon closer examination, I began to see that although the focus of our conversations was race, awareness by the teachers of themselves as raced (i.e., as having a race -- White) was in fact absent from the conversations. When asked how they described themselves, the teachers included many descriptors (e.g., female, Christian, Jewish, learner, mother, sister, etc.) but race as a descriptor was not among them. It was also absent from the description of themselves presented in the form of biographies. Because whiteness was and continues to be constructed as the norm, it was rendered invisible (Powell, 1995).

Further, when asked how they saw themselves as raced, the discussion focused not on what it means to be White, but rather, for example, how they responded differently as



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women when encountering a White man unknown to them on the street versus the different visceral reaction to a similar encounter with a Black man unknown to them.[2]

Lisa — How do you view yourself as raced, or non-raced, or not raced?

Carolyn — You mean as in racism?

Lisa — No . . . as identifying yourself as being a part of a race.

Carolyn — As having a race?

Lisa — Yes.

Marcy — I was thinking about, sometimes I go to the grocery store late at night and this is bothering me this year, these past two years more than last year. And I always try, you know, look around and see who's there but I'm more fearful of a Black man when I'm alone than a White and it shouldn't be that way. Well any stranger, but I notice that there is something in me. My gut feeling is that I need to walk faster, I need to get in the store, get my keys out, well always, but you're just more fearful and I don't know.

Marcia — I feel it everyday. I mean, I feel there's a distinction between White and Black. . . I do what Marcy does, you know, when I see a Black man I go through an entire thought process. Why am I doing that? And I think that's at least the first step in something that's good, when you've been exposed to an all raced, one-raced world.

The question I asked which prompted a discussion of these White women's reaction to encountering an unknown man on the street was, "How do you view yourself as raced?" The answer is in the absence. The women did not respond to how they see themselves as raced or not. Rather they talked about their reaction to a male other. Ruth Frankenberg (1993) writes that for many Whites, seeing race means being racist and being racist means being "bad" (p. 147). Given this understanding, as I began to listen more closely to my transcripts, what I did was not to ignore the silences, nor to collect more "data" in search of what was missing, but rather to pay attention to what was *not* being said. I looked for that which was spoken in the silence and by so doing began to develop a

[2] The research participants, with the exception of one, have asked that I use their first names as I present their narratives and questions. All other names referred to in the context of the conversations are pseudonyms.



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more layered, complicated analysis of the conversations. I began to notice the unintelligible truths present in my own history and that of the teachers.[3]

## Listening to the Voices of Silence

> In the first book of Kings, chapter 19, the Prophet Elijah had been reviled and rejected as he tried to do God's will. When he searched for meaning, an angel told him to go stand on the mountain, for the Lord would be passing by.
>
> When Elijah did so, there first came a strong and heavy wind that rended the mountains and crushed the rocks, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind, there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake, there was a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. Finally, after all these phenomena in which Elijah had expected to find his God, there cam a tiny, whispering sound, as small as if it were nothing at all. There, in the silence, God revealed himself to Elijah.
>
> (Bianco, 1991, p. 175)

One strategy for probing the metaphors inhabiting the silence is to reexamine the example provided by Tannen and Saville-Troike (1985), that of reversing the polarities of silence and talk. In other words, to treat talk as the "ground" against which the "figure" of silence is preferenced. This results in making the familiar strange and the strange familiar. "Within the familiar philosophical oppositions, there is always "a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms controls the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), holds the superior position.

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[3] Journal entry, February 7, 1996:

I am reminded of a story that my mother told me sometime during this past year. When I was in the first grade, my assigned teacher went on maternity leave early in the year. Although I was heartbroken by her departure, she was replaced by a teacher that I remember to this day. Mrs. Robinson was Black (of course I did not know that at the time).

One day my mother picked me up early from school for my annual (dreaded) visit to the pediatrician. On the way to the doctor's office, I said to her, "Mommy, did you know that Mrs. Robinson was Black?"

"Yes I did Lisa," was her kind reply.

"How did you know that?" I asked her bewildered.

My mother did not say what her reply to me was, nor do I remember. What I do remember was my mother talking about how we were raised to see everyone the same, and not to judge people based on their color. Someone in my class told me she was Black -- I'm not sure I even knew what that meant at the time. We were forbidden to repeat jokes that were demeaning to others (I would never have dreamed of telling a Black joke. At the time I was in elementary school, "Pollock" jokes were all the rage and I could never understand until later why my father had been so insistent that we not laugh at or tell these jokes.

I thank my parents for the way that I was raised.; however, I need to continue to unlearn NOT to talk about race (my own and others) for fear of embarrassment or offense.

To deconstruct the opposition is first... to overthrow the hierarchy'" (Spivak, 1976, pp. lxxvi-lxxvii). I am proposing an overthrow of the hierarchy -- a privileging of speech to the exclusion of absences. I am not suggesting that we ignore what participants tell us through conversations, written communication, or body language. What I am suggesting is that as qualitative researchers deference should also be given to the words not spoken -- the inhabited spaces of silence. By not discounting silence as ground, background, or absence, we may attend to it in ways which reveal mysteries by its very presence.

Further, by opening ourselves as researchers to the possibility of multiple meanings in the silences, we may not only gain new understandings, we may also use the silences as pointing to further areas of study which demand our attention. As I review the analysis from my study with White teachers, a continuing disappointment is that I didn't recognize the importance of the silences as they occurred. In many instances, I wasn't even able to recognize the silences until much later. As a result, I was unable to go back and gather with these teachers to talk about the silences and what they meant. The initial conversations and my questions focused on a probing of what was being said, rather than what was *not* being said. As I continue my research with White teachers, I will use the previous silences as the site for future collection of research information and analysis. I will not only use what has been said as the basis for future interviews, but also what has not been said. Additionally, I will attempt to be more attentive to the silences as they are spoken.

As I continue to probe silence as transgressive data, I seek practices which allow the silences to inform my teaching, reading, research, and writing. I will continue to put under erasure strategic signifiers such as data that can have the effect of silencing the silence. Toward this end I will continue to probe the absences in search of the purposeful metaphors inhabiting the ephemeral silence.

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